

Saved by His Tail

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Easy
7 min read

“The end, Outa, please,” said little Jan, “the end of The Animals’ Dam. You said it was too long to finish last night.”

“Aja, my baasje, it’s full of jakhals draaie, and that’s why it is so long, but it’s near the end now.

“The night was old by the time the animals had finished with old Broer Babiaan, and the stars were going out. Only the Big Star, that lasts the longest, was travelling quickly by the Stars’ Road to call the Dawn. It began to get light already at the place where the shining Old Man gets up every day, and that meant it was time for the animals to fade away to their sleeping-places.

“Oom Leeuw looked round on them. ‘Who will look after the dam to-night?’ he asked.

“‘I will,’ said a little voice, quickly. ‘Peep! peep!’

“‘And who is this that speaks from the ground?’ asked Oom. ‘Let us find this brave one.’

“They looked about in the sand, and there, under a milk-bush near the dam, sat the Water Tortoise. He was nice and big, baasjes, as big as the lid of the soap-pot, and his skinny legs were very strong. He stretched out his skinny neck and twinkled his little black eyes.

“I’ll look after the dam, Oom, and I’ll catch the Water-Spoiler for you.’

“Ha! ha! ha! How will you do that?’ asked Oom Leeuw.

“If Oom will just let someone rub my back with the sticky black stuff from the floor of the hives, then Oom will see what will happen.’

“This is a wise little man,’ said Oom Leeuw, and he ordered Old Brown Sister Hyena—she with the limp in the left hind leg—to rub the Water Tortoise with the sticky stuff.

“That night, my baasjes, when Jakhals went to the dam to drink, he peeped about, but no! there was no one to guard the dam; only a large black stone lay near the edge of the water.

“Arré! this is lucky,’ said Jakhals. ‘Such a nice large stone! I’ll stand on it while I drink.’

“He didn’t know that the stone had a strong skinny neck, and, on the end of the neck, a head with little bright eyes that could see everything that was going on. So he gave a jump, and—woops!—down he came on to the stone with his two front feet, and there they stuck fast to the sticky black stuff, and he could not move them. He tried, and he tried, but it was no use.

“Toever!’ he screamed, ‘toever! Let me go!’

“Peep! peep!’ said a little voice, ‘don’t be frightened.’

“Who says I’m frightened, you old toever stone?’ asked Jakhals. ‘Though my front feet are fast, I can still kick with my hind feet.’

“Kick, kick, kick, and stick fast,’ said the little voice.

“So Jakhals kicked and kicked, and his hind feet stuck fast.

“There was a funny sound under the water, like water bubbling through a reed. It was the Water Tortoise laughing.

“Nier-r-r! nier-r-r!” said Jakhals, getting very cross; ‘I’ve still got a tail, and I’ll beat you with it.’

“Beat, beat, beat, and stick fast,’ said the little voice.

“So Jakhals beat and beat, and his tail stuck fast.

“Nier-r-r!” he said again, very angry; ‘I’ve still got a mouth, and I’ll bite you with it.’

“Bite, bite, bite, and stick fast,’ said the little voice.

“Jakhals opened his mouth, and bit and bit, and his mouth stuck fast. There he was, all in a bundle, sticking altogether fast to the black stone, and the more he tried to get free, the more he stuck fast.

“Peep, peep!” said the Water Tortoise, poking up his head and laughing. Then he marched to the top of the dam-wall where everyone could see the strange sight, and there he sat, all quiet and good, till the other animals came.

“Arré! they were glad when they saw Jakhals sticking to the Water Tortoise. They held a Council and ordered him to be killed, and Broer Hyena—old Brown Sister’s husband—was to be the killer.

“They loosened Jakhal’s mouth from the sticky stuff, so that he could talk for the last time. He was very sorry for himself. His voice was thick with sorriness, and he could hardly get the words out.

“Thank you, Oom,’ he said. ‘I know I’m a wicked creature. It’s better for me to die than to live and trouble everyone so much.’

“Oom Leeuw and the other animals were wondering what kind of death the Water-stealer should die.

“Chop my head off,’ said Jakhals; ‘throw me in the fountain, but please, ach! please don’t shave my tail and hit me on the big stone.’

“Oom Leeuw and the others were still putting their heads together.

“Beat me with kieries, drown me in the dam,’ said Jakhals, ‘but don’t, ach! please don’t smear my tail with fat and hit me on the big stone.’

“Oom Leeuw and the others made as if they were taking no notice of him.

“Chop me in little pieces, beat me with thorn branches,’ said Jakhals, ‘but please, ach! please don’t take me by the tail and hit me on the big stone.’

“At last Oom Leeuw turned round.

“Just as you say, it shall be done. Shave his tail,’ he said to the others, ‘smear it with fat, and hit his head on the big stone. Let it be done.’

“So it was done, and Jakhals stood very still and sad while his tail was being shaved and smeared. But when Hyena swung him round—one, two, three, pht!—away he slipped and ran over the veld as fast as he could. All the others ran after him, but they were only running to catch and he was running to live, so he went like the wind, and soon they were left far behind.

“He never stopped till he came to a mountain where a krantz hung over and made a kind of cave, and in he crept. The first to come after him was Oom Leeuw, who had run faster than the others. Jakhals watched Oom crawling in, and when Oom’s head touched the top of the cave, he ran out, calling:

“Oom, Oom, the krantz is falling. If you don’t hold it up, you’ll be crushed to death. I’ll run and get a pole to prop it up, but Oom must please wait till I come back.’

“He left Oom plastering his head against the krantz to hold it up, while—pht!—he shot away, and never stopped till he got safe home, where he rolled bolmakissie over and over, laughing to think how he had cheated all the animals again.”

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